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## Transformative Impetus: A Look at Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*.

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*Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts (1941) works against the grain of understanding human subjectivity and its relationship with environment as mechanistic, primarily anthropocentric or teleological. It puts forth worlds that crisscross boundaries between nature and culture, the human and the animal. This essay explores the ways in which Woolf's portrayal of a decentralized, temporal relativity finds voice through principles of co-evolution and complexity theory, highlighting the co-dependency operating within evolutionary development as a transformative impetus.*

In Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), we encounter a text without a central protagonist, where glimpses into subjectivity function as relatable elements that contribute to the formation of a larger, anti-hierarchical and indeterminate whole. Woolf's text works against the grain of understanding human subjectivity and its relationship with the environment as mechanistic, primarily anthropocentric or teleological—rather, she puts forth a complex network of possible worlds that criss-cross boundaries between nature and culture, the human and the animal. What this provides us with is a way to understand narrative ecologically, wherein the subject matter circulating throughout the text is engaged in a form of inter-connected “becoming” that is necessarily imbricated within its given environment. The key to the movement generated within Woolf's text is twofold: environment and the subjects within it are engaged in a form of reciprocity that eradicates a deterministic partitioning of species organisation, and the mutability pre-supposed by such relationality indicates the temporality that guarantees transformation. Indeed, concepts of pre-history, national history and personal history coalesce throughout the text's pages as the very content that reveals a generative impulse. In this essay I will explore the ways in which Woolf's portrayal of a decentralised, temporal relativity finds voice through principles of co-evolution and complexity theory, in order to highlight the co-dependency operating within evolutionary development as a transformative impetus.

While extensive scholarship has been dedicated to Woolf's life and works, little has focused on her relationship to Darwin and evolutionary theory, though she read Darwin and expressed the desire to write about him in her journals (*Journals* 274, 294, 331). The link between evolutionary theory and *Between the Acts* has been particularly under-examined. Sam See's “The Comedy of Nature: Darwinian Feminism and Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*,” does explore this connection, however his main line of argument posits that “Woolf's aesthetic of concentration distils the tragedy of civilization into a comedy of nature” (643). See's turn to the comic to describe how Woolf wields evolutionary themes throughout *Between the Acts* provides an astute analysis of how nature's seemingly ambivalent evolutionary process usurps patriarchal structures and forms a “queer”

resistance to authority. Gillian Beer has discussed the relationship Woolf had with evolutionary theory more explicitly. Through focusing on concepts of prehistory Beer illustrates how, particularly in *Between the Acts* “with its shifty lexical play, its apocalyptic imminence, its easy vacillation between the domestic and the monstrous,” readers are met with Woolf’s “most unsettling meditation on the meanings of prehistory” (172). However, in my discussion of evolutionary theory and *Between the Acts*, I would like to depart from the analysis of literary tropes or a specific focus on gender and sexuality. Instead, I intend to provide an anti-anthropocentric analysis, which draws on many of the themes Beer covers in “Virginia Woolf and Prehistory,” but shifts the argument significantly by utilising later twentieth century theory to analyse *Between the Acts*. This is done to show how, in addition to exploring prehistory, Woolf’s use of evolutionary principles indicates a transformative and transmutative mechanism that is dynamic, de-centralised and contingent in ways that can be illuminated by contemporary theories on the human/animal difference, complex systems and anti-essentialist readings of evolution.

In order to assist this analysis I will be looking in particular at philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s writings on biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944).<sup>1</sup> Uexküll—a contemporary of Woolf—developed theories on *Umwelt* (environment) which suggest that human (and non-human) animals partake in the cultivation of potential worlds that contribute to a greater collectivity. I will also be looking at how philosopher Jacques Derrida puts pressure on theories of the human/animal difference, most particularly in his text *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008). Derrida questions the ethical and philosophical implications of understanding the animal under an anthropocentric rubric, suggesting that there is a homogenising violence in its evaluative terms. Lastly, I will draw on Keith Ansell-Pearson’s text *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* (1999) in order to look at how complexity theory suggests that small differences in any given condition can yield widely divergent outcomes which make long term prediction impossible. This suggests that formal structures serve as the means by which mutability is propelled, and that this transformation is intimately tied to the environment as engaged in co-evolutionary processes. By utilising the aforementioned conceptual terrain to explore the complexity of Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, I hope to underscore the mutability that evolutionary theory endorses, while emphasising its dependency on both time and relationality as essential components of its process.

From the very first pages of *Between the Acts*, we find ourselves immersed in a world where the threat of the Second World War looms as a shared anxiety. Woolf’s novel begins and ends on a June day in the late 1930s, where members of a small English village are gathered for the annual pageant at Pointz Hall, the Oliver family’s country home. The pageant, a piece of experimental theatre exploring scenes from English history before concluding in a participatory, present day vision of “ourselves,” loosely structures the general progress of the story. However, like the play, which puts pressure on the actor/audience divide, the novel breaks from traditional narrative division, blurring the distinction between “scene” and “characters.” Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse sketches out scenes that, freed from more conventional forms of plot structure, allow for subjectivity to fluctuate within environment more generally. This metaphorically illustrates the ways in which co-

developmental processes exceed classes of division. In this sense, Woolf's novel offers a vision of psychical processes that operate within an environment much like an organism: transmuting conclusive, teleological concepts of identity while mapping out an open-ended ontological mode that is subject to multiplicity, complexity and perpetual change. As the novel opens, cows "cough" and birds "chuckle," while women are "goose-like," or walk like "a swan swimming its way" (15). One of the main characters, Mrs. Swithin, is looking from her bedroom window while turning the pages of an *Outline of History*, musing about when the "entire continent...was all one" (*Between* 18). The pages of Woolf's novel continually explore concepts of connectivity and disjuncture, posing implicit questions that hinge on the history of present-day conflict and pre-historical visions of natural unity. Meanwhile, the novel's natural setting presses in upon its characters—swallows circle overhead, cows stare while chewing the cud as their human counterparts engage in secret dramas. Narrative threads drop off mid-sentence before being resumed by another character, an animal, or the onset of rain. The scenic mainstay of the story, Pointz Hall, is described as "provided by nature," and is "the cradle" of the Oliver family's "race" (*Between* 20, 62). Woolf continuously emphasises the relationality between place and those who occupy it, and in so doing sets up a way of depicting the oscillation between environment and culture as a ceaseless exchange.

Given the role of the oncoming war in the background of the story, this vision of exchange seems to suggest an alternative to the conclusive, deductive character of war and the ideology of totalitarianism by taking up the evolutionary mandate implicit in war's central ideology. That is to say, it confronts a pathology of war based on forms of evolutionary essentialism, which follows an exclusive "survival of the fittest" motto. Woolf had discussed war as an ideology of fascism more explicitly in other texts, such as the feminist book-length essay *Three Guineas* (1938) which was one of her most celebrated works during her lifetime. However, *Between the Acts* challenges the ethos of war *not* by examining the war directly, but rather by emphasising the coordinates between "us" and "them" through her novel's focus on the blurred distinctions between characters within the text and their natural setting. In so doing, Woolf manages to gesture towards evolutionary principles as a de-essentialised resource for ways of configuring forms of reciprocity—"aren't we all flesh and blood?"—rather than as forms of segregation which define acts of systematic violence (*Between* 39). The guests assembled at Pointz Hall for their annual pageant share a collective anxiety driven by the threat of an oncoming war, yet they all subjectively reveal narrative lines that dip into both a historical and pre-historical past in ways that betray threats of degeneration. The transformation that occurs over time, which allows for evolutionary processes to occur, is highlighted by the way the novel digs into the coalescence of nature, time and culture. Rooms become "a shell, singing of what was before time was" evoking a primeval lineage which effaces anthropomorphic teleologies (*Between* 38).

At the time Woolf was writing she cannot have been aware of the full extent of Hitler's eugenic plans, but she still recognised the abnegating, destructive mentality behind the ideology of war, which champions an exclusive "us-versus-them" mentality. While there are few direct references to the oncoming war throughout the pages of *Between the Acts*—a direct threat appears within the text more as a phantom than a concrete fear—the novel's narrative style and content seems to serve as a

commentary on the ideology of war as the product of a dichotomous, hierarchically enforced mindset. This subtle form of critique provides a means of showing life caught up in the reality of war while remaining at a distance from it. By exploring the dichotomy of “self” and “other” from a different, although equally “evolutionarily” minded perspective, the focus of the novel shifts from the pseudo-evolutionary thinking implicit in the destruction of the “other” in favour of propagating the “self” by instead exploring the relationality between nature and culture. This signifies a return to a reading of evolutionary principles that are perhaps more faithful to Darwin’s general project. That is, Woolf’s depiction of evolutionary theory seems to fall closely in line with Darwin’s explicit understanding of the mutability and transformative nature of evolutionary process. Indeed, he emphasises in *On the Origin of Species*, “let it be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life” (63). By removing a centralised, teleological or anthropocentric claim on natural difference and transformation, Woolf’s novel emphasises the collective reciprocity by which the evolutionary process functions. There is no definitive project within evolution; rather, it is the participatory nature of all living things coalescing in relation to one another that form the vital impetus that promotes evolutionary change. Or, as Darwin wrote “it is the steady accumulation, through natural selection of ... differences, when beneficial to the individual, that gives rise to all the more important modifications of structure” (128).

As already stated, *Between the Acts* is a narrative encounter that evades a central, mediating “I.” Indeed, as See points out in his article, Woolf “presents a community in the process of self-divestiture” (642). Through fragmented conversations, overlapping experiences, and disjointed thoughts that merge present and past with the uncertainty of the future, the novel illustrates a “lived” time that exposes a resonance between an evolutionary “natural” past and a lived present. Before the play begins Mrs. Swithin imagines the “barking monsters ... from whom presumably we descend,” and later in the text she affirms that “we live in others ... we live in things” (*Between* 18, 61). The contraction and expansion that highlights a connection between the pre-historic past and the novel’s present-day characters suggests a broad continuum that collapses temporal distance. However, from early on in the novel this experience is not understood as a holistic, idealised unity, but rather as something that is contingent, that transforms and jostles a creative disjuncture that evades a conclusive determinism by virtue of the temporality inherent in progressive change. The characters in the novel are “too close, yet not close enough,” and they struggle with ways to cope with this distance—“they fidgeted” (57, 58). The struggle for a central unity seems to be impossible, yet it is the very ideology of centralisation that is implicitly critiqued, suggesting “sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves—are all one” (130). The pageant, as an exploration of national history, seems to offer up a chance at some form of narrative stability, yet the first character to appear onstage is a child representing “England” who promptly forgets her lines. Again, in innovative ways Woolf enforces concepts of relationality while straying from the idea of a totalising whole as the solution to the modernist problem of dispersion.

Estonian Jakob von Uexküll was an early nineteenth century biologist whose investigations into animal environment led him to refute classical science’s anthropocentric conception of a single,

hierarchically organised world. Uexküll disagreed with methods of categorisation that understood natural systems functioning within an environment hierarchically—arguing, as Giorgio Agamben summarises, that too often these categories emerged from an anthropocentrism that “imagines the relations a certain animal subject has to the things in its environment take place in the same space and time as those which bind us to the objects in our human world” (40). According to Agamben, Uexküll instead advocated an understanding of environment that displaces conceptions of a hierarchically organised common world, by showing that each entity within any given environment understands its environment in a unique way. In this sense, each character participating in life possesses its own environment and while these perceptual worlds are reciprocally exclusive they are all “perfectly linked together as if in a gigantic musical score” (40). Similarly, the narrative ties that fasten and unfasten the narrative inter-play within Woolf’s text pointedly refrain from presenting environment as a unifying total principle. Indeed, the play provokes different reactions in each one of its actors, and its audience, affirming the play’s chant “dispersed are we” (*Between* 78). Beyond the play, each character experiences their own individual way of being in the world, as well as having differentiated ways of sharing in the social experience of being an audience member. Space and time do not exist in the same way for every living creature, and as such it is impossible to imagine a world in which everything exists by a single unitary concept of either space or time. Despite the narrative binding of the play’s central theme—British history—the method by which it is enacted provokes widely divergent responses. The scenarios that the novel’s characters find themselves in fail to bind everyone to a common cause. Yet what is continually enforced is the way in which any given event is participatory; everyone is spurred onward by the ways in which they both relate to and conflict with other characters within the text.

During the first interval of the play, Isa’s husband Giles comes across a snake in the grass, choking on a toad. It is repulsive to him: “a spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed” (80). In response Giles stamps on the animals: “[t]he mass crushed and slithered,” acting as a cathartic release for his repulsion, as “[a]ction relieved him” (80). This moment in the text not only highlights the general differences between Giles and his inclusive, poet wife—it also reinforces the way in which the human/animal divide is construed. While previously in the text nature had served as an imposing backdrop, inflecting narrative texture by punctuating its progression; in this scene it comes to the fore as a confrontation with brute difference as a cause for “othering” violence. Giles is both insensitive to and provoked by nature; he seeks to extinguish its impingement on his dominion by asserting decisive action. As a pseudo-hunter figure, at once impotent and virile, he is disturbed by this scene of natural struggle and responds by stamping it out. Within this scene is the implicit vision of the futilities of a fascist mentality; the idea of dominance becomes choked on its own ideals of natural order by illustrating the erratic and interchangeable quality that is elemental to interspecies dynamics. It seems perverse for a snake to die by virtue of its “natural” predatory instinct because this suggests that there is no governing law of supremacy or predictable order. Giles stamps out the snake/toad battle because it signifies the paradoxical, transmutable exchange between natural forces. The battle goes against the grain of a naturally calculable order: it doesn’t make “sense.”

In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, philosopher Jacques Derrida embarks on a rigorous analysis of the pervading categorisation of the animal as “Other” in philosophical thought by proposing a form of relationality based in finitude and vulnerability. Images of organised torture occupy Derrida’s pages—indeed, the second half of the chapter focuses on the suffering of the animal, sketching out the question that he thinks is one of the most important: “can they suffer?” (27). Such a question underscores the anxiety that occupies issues concerning morality braced against the “vulnerability of anguish” experienced during times of war (28). Derrida’s very mode of understanding the experience of the “Otherness” of the animal allows for an analogically relatable reading of an evolutionary commonality. That is to say, suggested in Derrida’s reading of the animal/human divide is a common thread which links suffering, like that experienced—perhaps simultaneously—by the toad and the snake, into a broader commentary on shared suffering. The toad and the snake present a parable of the anxiety experienced in Woolf’s text regarding the upcoming war, while also highlighting the way in which systematic violence is nevertheless pervasive, and perhaps “illogical.” Giles stomps on the frog and toad, and therefore this commonality is both shared by and lost on him. The insensitivity to connectivity reinforces dead ends, missing the mark that the act of suffering as a connective, pervasive, and mobilising experience can perhaps underscore. As Derrida writes, the experience of suffering prompts ways to open windows onto a greater relationality, which requires a new language, just as thinking beyond the language of a “rational animal” requires the language of the suffering animal: “thinking the finitude we share with animals” (28).

The play in *Between the Acts* carries on, and in its second act something goes wrong: “Mouths open, but no sound came” (107). The play’s creator, Miss La Trobe is paralysed from her position in the bushes as the play falters, feeling as though “power” has left her (107). However, as the illusion “petered out, the cows took up the burden ... one had lost her calf” (107). La Trobe, in her particular way of relating to environment as she participates in the unfolding reception of her play, remains tied to the way nature bolsters and informs the very plot development she devised. Although it is clear that she has a sense of propriety in relation to the way her play is executed, natural interference has no negative influence over her; it comes as recourse, as a salvific turn of events that contributes to a larger unfolding. La Trobe embraces the very contingency that assists in executing her play to the fullest extent, providing the necessary jolts to her audience that will wake them up, to “make them see” (79). In this particular scene in the novel, La Trobe reveals herself as the only character in the novel who *does* really think in the language of the suffering animal, and in so doing is able to alleviate the way that she suffers through a relationality to non-human animals. La Trobe’s experience of a shift—in which her emotional burden is eased through her witnessing of a cow who had lost her calf—demonstrates a means to configure Derrida’s question “can they suffer?” (27). That is, underscoring the relationship between all living things which is formed out of contingency, but where such contingencies give rise to or promote relationships in the first place.

Throughout the duration of the play in *Between the Acts*, scenes from English history are revealed. Finally, the last act of the play descends upon the audience members in a cornucopia of images. Bits of mirror, tin cans and old jars, “anything that is bright enough to reflect” are held up in a

startling exposé, reflecting the audience themselves: “the whole population of the mind’s immeasurable profundity came flocking ... they crashed; solved; united” (140). As the actors of the play turn bits of reflective material onto the audience members, so does Woolf’s prose break into a mosaic of images that mimic the fragmented quality of divergent subjective lines. Galia Benziman points out in her article “Dispersed Are We” that this scene in the pageant “does not offer a complete, static picture but a broken dancing one ... horrifying, disfigured, disorienting” (66). The play intrudes on its audience in a dizzying array of snapshots, which efface any semblance of the audience-actor boundary built up throughout the novel. Returning briefly to Agamben’s reading of Uexküll, perceptual worlds here become linked together in a gigantic musical score, construing connectivity through the fragmented material of difference that makes up the larger symphony of life. The idea of a larger, collaborative move is underscored by the juxtaposition of the jagged images of various characters in the audience, and the unifying reflection of their disjuncture. The pageant “favours the distorted, quivering, insecure and potentially ludicrous self-image, which is disconcerting yet genuine, over a self-flattering representation of totality, stability and symmetry” (Benziman 67). Reflecting on the play, the message comes across in the words of one character: “we act different parts, but are the same ... [d]are we limit ... life to ourselves?” (*Between* 142). Woolf, in turning the mirror on “ourselves” implicitly suggests that the recourse to violent dichotomies that tear nations apart, that tear the human from the natural, can be dissolved by looking around, and by looking inward—and in so doing there is a potential to find a deeper history, immanent and atemporal to experience.

In *Germinal Life*, Keith Ansell-Pearson highlights the division between neo-Darwinism and principles of co-evolution and complexity theory. Drawing on the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), who wrote extensively on concepts of multiplicity, complexity theory, schizophrenia, and anti-hierarchical approaches to politics, Ansell-Pearson underscores how Deleuze’s theories highlight the importance of linking complexity to an understanding of natural systems. In broad terms, complexity theory is “a movement within contemporary biology that has sought to promote the concept of co-evolution in order to go beyond the alleged genetic reductionism and determinism of neo-Darwinism” (Ansell-Pearson 146). Co-evolution attempts to dissolve the opposition of organism and environment by showing that they cannot exist as closed systems while remaining subject to external forces and determinations. Indeed, in this model of evolution, the focus on theories of natural selection moves from the environment that selects the organism to an understanding of the organism that bestows it with equal power of selection. The critique levelled at neo-Darwinism is that it too often strips organisms of agency, reducing them to “an expression of genes and their products” (Ansell-Pearson 149). Instead, complexity theory emphasises the ability of the organism to display innovative capacities for self-organisation that exceed mechanistic conceptions of causality. This view takes into account the constant perturbations and mutations found throughout evolutionary theory by showing the dynamic nature of living systems. In this understanding of evolutionary theory we see La Trobe’s appeal to her audience as an impetus to partake in an understanding of co-evolutionary processes, and a call to a more general responsibility. We are all one, in the sense that we are all comprised of similar—“stuff”—genetic make-up, yet we are



also all one in the sense that we are all kin, bearing a relatable, ethical responsibility to one another—“*let us retain whatever made that harmony*” (*Between* 145; emphasis in orig.). From the sheep in the fields to the drama enacted between the different human characters, and from the figureheads of history to the swallows circling overhead; all things coalesce within the gigantic symphony of life that is both indeterminate and participatory—“[s]urely we should unite?” (*Between* 142).

In one of the final scenes in the novel we find Mrs Swithin gazing into a lily pool, “retrieving some glint of faith from grey waters” (151). The observation of fish in water suggests a relationship with a deep ancestral past as well as the possibility of a transformative relationality that mobilises structural change—“that vision of beauty, power and glory in ourselves” which is ceaselessly engaged within the natural world (151). However, Woolf leaves off on uncertain footing; Isa ends the novel with a “Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed out embracing. No, no, no, it contracted” (157). But perhaps this is the structure of the very vital impulse that defines evolutionary processes. The characters in the novel seemingly sought a general, unifying principle to hold themselves together in the face of the oncoming war—they gathered around the pageant event in order to escape the looming threat of war. Yet, throughout the course of *Between the Acts*, we see that the idea of a hierarchical organisation, any structural force whatsoever, is contrary to the myriad of possible worlds that contribute to the complexity that informs a generative impulse. Forms of symbiotic engagement are not to be construed as operating through a simple, monadic harmony—indeed, life occurs and transforms through contingencies. The jolting, dynamic process that occurs by the very act of living contains within it the very stuff of conflict. Repetition and difference are inextricably tied to one another, leading to an anti-essentialist evolution that reveals the temporality ensuring the vital becoming of life as transformative and dynamic. While the guests at Pointz Hall struggle to snuff out their fears of the impending war, nature’s encroachment upon both the pageant and the characters that participate in it allow for a depiction of variance and the evolutionary history that sustains it. What this does is level a subtle critique at both hierarchical organisation and destructive modes of homogenisation. Fragmented conversations, overlapping experiences and coalescing histories reveal an oscillating resonance that moves between past and present, joined together by the very contingency that generates its movement.

## Notes

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1. I am choosing to explore Uexküll's theories through Giorgio Agamben because I would like to indirectly reference the political possibilities that an anti-hierarchical understanding of species organization and evolutionary theory alludes to. Agamben uses Uexküll for these purposes. Beyond Uexküll's own writings, Heidegger's *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* evokes Uexküll in exploring what differentiates the human from the animal.

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